

IN MEMORIAM: SOEMARSAID MOERTONO, 1922-1987

Arlene and Daniel Lev

On April 13, 1987 Soemarsaid Moertono died in a Surabaya hospital, of a brain tumor. He was sixty-five years old. For so many of us who learned from him, enjoyed him, and loved him, it is a great loss.

Most know only his book, *State and Statecraft in Old Java*, published in 1968 as a CMIP monograph. It was his MA thesis, which he wrote during the early 1960s at Cornell under Oliver Wolters' supervision. But to say simply that "he wrote it" diminishes the achievement. Actually he fought with it, preparing himself each day for a kind of spiritual battle between detachment from and intimate sympathy for his subject. Umar Kayam, another regular at 102 West at the time, evokes Mas Moer marvelously in his obituary in *Tempo*, May 9, "Lahirnya Sebuah Karya Besar" (The Birth of a Significant Work). The scene is an Ithaca winter morning, through which Mas Moer has marched to 102 West Ave, damning the cold as he enters and announcing serious doubts about the wisdom of coming so far only to be tortured by this kind of weather:

The curses accompanied the entry of a large man, who opened and banged the door of the old building that housed the Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, stamping his rubber boots as he climbed the creaking stairs to his room. He flung his (by Javanese standards) big body on the disheveled couch strewn with papers and books. He clamped his eyes shut. Five or ten minutes he sat like that. Then, slowly, he rose again, took off his thick coat, sweater, and scarf, tossing them in the direction of the couch.

Then he sat at his desk. A stack of typed paper covered with pencilings came out of his briefcase. He looked for a long time at this pile of paper, drawing several deep breaths. Before him he would imagine the face of his supervisor, Professor Oliver Wolters, an historian of Southeast Asia, . . . cool, demanding, and very English, who, after so many of their meetings, . . . could still find weak spots in his thesis draft. . . .

But soon he would accept the task set by his thesis advisor. So he read the comments again. . . . And he returned to the *Babad Tanah Jawi*, the *Serat Centini*, the *Serat Rama*, the *Gato Loco*, the *Darma Gandul*, and of course all the contemporary studies by people like Berg, De Graaf, Pigeaud, as well as [materials from] the *keraton*.

Mas Moer loved this research on Mataram, even as the hard work of it made him miserable, but not simply as an historian. He treasured re-learning, or learning in another way, something he already knew, was intimate with, in the huge fascination of Java. *State and Statecraft* is fine history, valuable history that will last, but it is also Mas Moer's respectful and affectionate tribute to a tradition he suspected was all but done. It may be that another scholar could have written something like it, but not with his delighted appreciation of the

ideas, styles, and standards. "When one has seen court officials sitting for hours on end in the sand-strewn courtyard of the inner palace compounds in the shadow of the many trees one cannot help but be impressed by their correct, absolute immobility and yet undiminishing alertness; this posture and state of mind was most favorable to the constant spiritual awareness of *semedi*" (p. 98).

Mas Moer knew these *priyayi* because in some important measure he still shared their ethos, which was an essential reason for writing the thesis. At a time when the bureaucrat had become a much maligned figure of public disdain--not only in Java--Mas Moer recognized how pivotal the role, at its best, must be in a society seeking tranquility and justice. "Feudal," since before the revolution, had become a term of opprobrium, but Mas Moer also knew perfectly well that there was too much of value in old Java to dismiss out of hand, and he did not.

For those of us who knew him well in Ithaca and Malang or Jakarta, he made more than a small impression on our lives. At 102 West Avenue, for as long as he was there, he was at the center of the close, cohesive company of graduate students, few of whom, probably, ever found that kind of community again. It is a little disconcerting how many memories of those very good times involve him--Mas Moer explaining something Javanese, arguing about an interpretation, entertaining a small and attentive crowd, as Kayam recalls, with "hot" passages from the *Serat Centini*, playing his guitar and singing *keroncong*, diplomatically helping to organize a *malam kesenian*, dancing Cakil--Mas Moer then in his early forties--to exhaustion. His influence on us was not due merely to seniority. It was a response to his enthusiastic, utterly sincere embrace of our collective *tugas*--learning and right living, the latter in some ways flowing from the former, for if, as he sensed and thought, one could understand history, nature, one's place in the scheme of things, one would know how to behave. He honestly believed that "a close personal relationship accompanied by feelings of mutual love and respect" should be "the standard mode of social communication" (*State and Statecraft*, p. 26). And he made it seem easy.

Mas Moer apparently thought often about returning to his studies to complete a PhD but never found the opportunity. He taught regularly at the civil service academy, with time out for lecturing terms in Leiden and Santa Cruz. We hope his students learned as much from him as all of us did.